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ABSTRACT

Responsible and effective administrative leadership requires confronting those members of the teaching staff who are a negative influence on the institution. Importantly, the absence of expressed appreciation for good work can have a devastating impact on a principal's image if he or she suddenly begins to confront poor performances. Actually, the confrontation itself is a multistep process that includes: (1) gathering information by reviewing the teacher's file and talking to other staff members while maintaining the rights of confidentiality and privacy of the teacher in question; (2) assembling collected data in meaningful order and discussing the pending encounter with the teacher's direct supervisor; (3) waiting for a specific incident before confronting the teacher; (4) if documentation of the meeting is going to be kept, informing the teacher of this while the confrontation is still in progress; (5) monitoring the progression of the teacher's improvement (if any) while demonstrating ongoing support and concern; and (6) working with the teacher's association. Confronting poor performance and the negative people who generate it, while never a pleasant task, is a genuine manifestation of the principal's concern for the morale of his or her students and staff. (KM)

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CONFRONTING POOR PERFORMANCE

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CONFRONTING POOR PERFORMANCE

Bruce L. Dennis

Schools, like all organizations, are staffed with people who demonstrate varying levels of skill and commitment. Every school has teachers who may be identified as positive, neutral, and negative performers. Positive people are easy to spot: kids want to be in their classes, parents request that their children be so assigned and the teachers enjoy the respect of their colleagues and supervisors. Neutral teachers don't elicit such strong sentiments. They do their jobs satisfactorily, but often lack the creative sparkle or excitement of their more positive colleagues. Students and parents accept placement in their classes, although they might not necessarily choose these teachers if they were given the opoportunity to select. The overwhelming majority of teachers in our schools (and, probably, administrators, secretaries, custodians, and aides) fall into these two categories of acceptable employees. Not surprisingly, one of the chief distinguishing features of outstanding schools is a preponderance of positive teachers, and the more of these people who work in a school, the better, in general, that institution can be said to be.

There are, however, teachers in all of our schools who could be labeled as negative influences on the institution, and responsible and effective administrative leadership is obligated to confront their poor performance. Ultimately, the responsibility for this action rests directly with the school principal.

Defining Poor Performance

Poor performance may be viewed as aggregated "behaviors of excess":

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excessive lack of preparation; excessive deficiencies of teaching skill; excessive problems of student control; excessive manifestations of poor judgment; excessive absence from school. The notion of "aggregated excess" is an important one on which to focus, since any teacher, even the very best we have, can sometimes fall prey to one or even several of the shortcomings just noted. Human beings err in judgment; occasionally their preparation for class is less thorough than it should be; and, who among us has not encountered students or even entire classes that were difficult to control.

Poor performers, however, demonstrate repeated or "aggregated excess" in one or more of the areas described above and seem to lack the wherewithal or the inclination to improve their performance. They have a negative impact on their students, they diminish the community's perception of the school and, not surprisingly, they embarrass and frustrate their more capable colleagues who know their identities as well as if not better than any principal or other administrator or supervisor.

Rewarding Good Performance

A principal who is concerned with confronting poor performance must also be readily disposed to acknowledge and reward the good work of his or her staff. Remembering that the vast majority of teachers are either excellent or satisfactory, principals should seize every opportunity to praise and reward high quality performance. Although money and other similar incentives are usually not available to principals, notes of praise, public recognition at meetings, and even a personal and direct "Thank you" let your valued people know that their efforts are both noted and appreciated. Motivational theory and simple common sense tell us that all human beings respond to positive reinforcement and "strokes". I am not suggesting, however, that praise for some be used merely as a way of balancing the impact of negative feedback to others. Nor am I suggesting that praise should be awarded when

it is not truly warranted. Rather, a principal's credibility and perceived fairness depend in large measure on how he or she is regarded by the teachers in the school. Praise and positive reinforcement are powerful tools in their own right and every effective school leader knows the power they possess. Importantly, though, the absence of expressed appreciation for good work can have a devastating impact on a principal's image if he or she suddenly begins to confront poor performers.

Identification Before Confrontation

Before you set out to confront, identify those staff members whose impact on the institution and its clients is demonstrably negative. In all likelihood, this will be a very small number of people, probably fewer than five percent of your total staff. If you find yourself in the unenviable position of having a larger number of poor performers, distill your list further, selecting the very poorest people you have working for you. Particularly if you are new to your school or if your previous style has been marked by soft pedaling poor performance and hoping it would go away, you do not want to target more than two or three people for such negative attention in any one year. And, make very certain that the people you identify are those whom students, parents, supervisors, and even other teachers (in private and among themselves, of course) would consider your poorest performers.

The Confrontation Process

Confrontation is a process rather than a single event. It requires thought, preparation, and planning and should not be rushed. I have broken the process into a series of 12 steps:

1. Gather Data--Data have power! Before confronting any teacher, you need to do your homework. Read the teacher's file thoroughly to see if previous

mention has been made of the concerns you have identified. This may not be a fruitful endeavor, however, since the files of even our very worst teachers often contain very little negative information. There are, however, other data sources to be tapped, depending on the nature of your concerns: the teacher's attendance record; student performance indicators (test results, report card grades, school-wide or standardized tests); letters of complaint from parents, students or colleagues; number of requests for program changes out of this teacher's classes; teacher's disciplinary referrals or student attendance follow-up, etc.

2. Talk to Others--Obviously, you have an obligation to respect the confidentiality and privacy rights of the teacher in question. You can and should, however, speak frankly to the teacher's department head, team leader, direct supervisor, and/or your assistant principals to determine their perceptions of this individual and to acquire whatever data they may have that you don't know about. Don't overlook guidance counselors in this process, for they will be aware of how many students and/or parents have requested changes of schedule to flee the teacher in question. When speaking to counselors, you may avoid singling out a particular teacher by asking questions such as "Have you noticed that any particular staff have seemed to prompt unusually large numbers of student schedule change requests?" In this way, they can supply you with the name of the teacher in question and you can add to your data.

3. Organize your Information--Sort out what you have found and assemble it in a thoughtful and meaningful way. Before you meet with the teacher, speak to his or her direct supervisor and discuss how you will proceed and who will participate in the face-to-face meeting. It is almost always desirable to have at least one other person at such meetings, and the immediate supervisor is usually the best choice. Of course, decide in advance what part the

department chairperson or supervisor will play: active participant, responder to your questions, or silent witness.

4. Wait for a Specific Incident--In general, poor performers provide you with frequent opportunities for confrontation, so wait for something specific to happen--the teacher uses profanity in class again; the counselors report that 18 students have requested schedule changes in the first two weeks of school; the teacher accumulates his 15th absence, etc. Having something specific on which to focus invariably makes for a more useful meeting.

5. Inform the Teacher of the Meeting--Let the teacher know, by written note, that you wish to speak with him or her to discuss a specific concern that has just arisen. Tell the teacher that you've asked his or her chairperson to sit in on your meeting, but don't go into detail about the nature of your concerns in your memo.

6. Meet with the Teacher--When the teacher and chairperson are in your office, let the teacher know what is on your mind. In a sentence or two, express your serious concern, i.e., "I was informed by a student that you used profanity in class on Tuesday, November 23, when you said . . ." or "For the eighth consecutive year, you have acquired over 15 absences from school by April 1, a number of absences over three times the average for teachers in the district." Let the teacher respond and then present the teacher with the rationale for your concerns. Ask the teacher how he or she feels about this behavior, so you may sense whether there is contrition or resistance. If you intend to write up the meeting, inform the teacher while he or she is still in your office. It is gutless and unfair to allow a person to feel that a matter has ended with a conversation and then to receive a letter that will be included in his or her file.

7. Write the Meeting Up--Depending on the seriousness of the behavior and the previous record of the individual, you may want to document the meeting by

providing the teacher with a written letter summarizing what you discussed. Be certain that your letter is factually based and that you don't write down anything that you didn't talk about. Remember, you can adjust the level of threat by simply sending the letter to the teacher, or by copying other people (personnel director, superintendent, etc.) and/or requiring the teacher to sign the letter for his or her file.

8. Monitor the Situation--Make it your business to be aware of how things are progressing. Keep detailed notes of your meeting, whether or not you formally write it up. If another incident occurs, call in the teacher immediately and then send him or her a follow-up letter. Let the individual know you are monitoring his or her behavior and that you will confront him or her if anything similar recurs. You may also wish to allude to ultimate consequences if the behavior doesn't improve.

9. Develop a File--In addition to your own notes and copies of correspondence, make every effort to get other people to express their concerns in writing when they approach you about this teacher. If a student seeks a schedule change, have the youngster put his reasons in writing. If a parent calls with a serious allegation, have the parent write you a letter. I am not suggesting you beat the bushes or solicit negative mail. Rather, try to obtain the written concerns of others when they seek you out to complain.

10. Help the Teacher to Improve--Offer the teacher whatever assistance you are able to provide. If class control problems are the issue, permit the person to attend a relevant conference--even consider funding his or her attendance through the school. If a person wants to right a bad situation, work with the person to improve. And, of course, be prepared to forgive.

11. Demonstrate your Ongoing Concern--If the teacher won't cooperate and continues the pattern of behavior that caused your initial concern, be ready to follow up. Dismissal of tenured staff may be difficult to obtain, but is

by no means impossible or your only recourse. Let the teacher feel your continued displeasure in written correspondence, at personal meetings, through frequent direct supervision, by altering of teaching and non-teaching assignments, and with other similar approaches.

12. Work with your Teachers' Association--When circumstances permit it, work cooperatively with your teachers' representatives. Regardless of their public posture and their obligations to defend their rank-and-file, teachers association leaders are probably as embarrassed by some of their colleagues as you are. Let them know you are not interested in harrassment or vindictiveness but that you will not tolerate repeatedly unacceptable behavior. Be wary of how much you reveal about a teacher's problems, since such discussion may be perceived as a violation of the teacher's privacy rights in certain situations. Usually, however, the teacher will seek assistance from the association and you can then operate accordingly.

Conclusion

Confronting poor performance and the negative people who generate it is never a pleasant task. When informal methods or reminders fail, however, or when an individual repeatedly exceeds appropriate boundaries despite an awareness of your concerns, confrontation is a genuine manifestation of the principal's concern for the morale of his students and staff.

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